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JMI dialogue

TOWARD A SITUATED STANCE IN ORGANIZATIONAL INSTITUTIONALISM:  
CONTRIBUTIONS FROM FRENCH PRAGMATIST SOCIOLOGY THEORY

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# TOWARD A SITUATED STANCE IN ORGANIZATIONAL INSTITUTIONALISM: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM FRENCH PRAGMATIST SOCIOLOGY THEORY

## **Abstract**

Organizational Institutionalism is gradually embracing a more situated, actor-centred stance that is prompting empirical inquiry into how embedded actors respond to institutional complexity. French Pragmatist Sociology can contribute to this endeavor because it provides a situated, relational and practice-oriented framework for studying how actors negotiate and justify actions through shared moral ‘worlds’ that are akin to institutional logics. French Pragmatist Sociology can help illuminate three questions that are key to a situated stance in Organizational Institutionalism: a) How free are individuals to engage with non-institutionalized mind-sets? b) How institutionally determined are individual interests? And c) how deliberate are individuals about provoking institutional effects? The discussion includes concrete proposals for empirical study as well as limitations and potential pitfalls that should be taken into consideration.

**Keywords:** French Pragmatist Sociology, Organizational Institutionalism, embedded agency, economies of worth, institutional logics, institutional work.

**Word count:** 2333 (text, excl. references) + 124 (abstract) = 2457

## TOWARD A SITUATED STANCE IN ORGANIZATIONAL INSTITUTIONALISM: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM FRENCH PRAGMATIST SOCIOLOGY

Scholars of organizational institutionalism are paying increasing attention to the micro-foundations of institutional processes (Battilana, Leca & Boxenbaum, 2009; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011; Lounsbury & Boxenbaum, 2013; Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012). In so doing, they aim to shed light on how organizational actors and actions produce institutional effects at the field level, such as a change of dominant institutional logic, the emergence of a new organizational field, or the deinstitutionalization of taken-for-granted beliefs or practices. In empirical studies, scholars increasingly adopt a situated stance, which highlights the perspective and behavior of actors. A situated stance refers to a shift in analytical perspective, one that ‘turns upside down’ the analytical entry point. Rather than examining how institutions diffuse within a field (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), Organizational Institutionalists study how embedded actors respond to, and influence, their institutional environment. The motivations, interpretations, actions and emotions of actors move to the foreground; field level dynamics to the background.

Many interesting studies along these lines have been carried out in recent years. They evoke the notions of institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009), institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2011), inhabited institutions (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006), and distributed agency (Garud & Karnoe, 2003). As yet, we do not have an integrated actor-centred analytical framework that can be mobilized to study institutional processes bottom-up (see Bollinger, this volume, for a commentary). In a collective effort to develop such a perspective, Organizational Institutionalists are borrowing concepts and methods from adjacent literatures and integrating empirical

research findings. For instance, the notion of ‘institutional entrepreneurship’ draws on entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009) whereas ‘institutional work’ mobilizes insight from the sociology of practice (Zilber, 2013). Organizational Institutionalists also apply theoretical concepts from critical realism, critical studies, relational pragmatism, and social theorizing of Bourdieu to refine the notions of inhabited institutions, institutional work, institutional entrepreneurship, and situated organizational action (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013; Leca & Naccache, 2006; Mutch, Delbridge & Ventresca, 2006; Willmott, 2011).

A recent suggestion is to integrate the notion ‘economies of worth’ from the work of Boltanski and Thévenot (1991, 2006) into Organizational Institutionalism. Cloutier and Langley (2013) carefully review some of the key concepts and benefits associated with integrating this framework into institutional theory. They suggest that the notion of ‘economies of worth’ can be combined fruitfully with the notion of institutional logics to shed light on institutional micro-foundations. Extending their argument of complementarity, this paper elaborates on how, and under which conditions, Organizational Institutionalism may benefit from integrating elements of French Pragmatist Sociology to develop a situated stance for empirical inquiry.

#### THE ADDED VALUE OF FRENCH PRAGMATIST SOCIOLOGY

French Pragmatist Sociology is well adapted to combination with Organizational Institutionalism because of some remarkable parallels and complementarities. First of all, there is a reasonable match between the notions of ‘economies of worth’ (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991, 2006) and ‘worlds of production’ (Salais & Storper, 1993; Storper & Salais, 1997) in French Pragmatist Sociology and the notions of ‘institutional logics’

and ‘institutional complexity’ in Organizational Institutionalism (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta & Lounsbury, 2011; Thornton et al., 2012). This parallel is becoming all the more pronounced as organizational fields are increasingly seen as characterized by multiple, co-existing institutional logics. The available range of worlds/ logics is not identical in the two theories. French Pragmatist Sociology emphasizes worlds that are manifestations of how individuals experience them (e.g. the inspired world) while Organizational Institutionalism is more attuned to logics that reflect social structure (e.g., the church, the family, the market).

Secondly, both theories take an interest in how actors engage with multiple worlds or logics in organizational practice (see e.g., Lounsbury & Boxenbaum, 2013). They differ in their analytical focus, however. French Pragmatist Sociology pays close attention to the interaction among individuals, particularly during negotiations and decision-making. In contrast, Organizational Institutionalism is more attuned to how actors respond to, and enact, institutional logics. French Pragmatist Sociology offers an analytical framework that is well adapted to studying interactions between individuals, but which does not take into account the institutional conditioning of such interactions.

### KEY QUESTIONS FOR A SITUATED STANCE

The discussion below looks at how French Pragmatist Sociology can contribute to answering three questions of importance for a situated stance in Organizational Institutionalism. It also addresses limitations and potential pitfalls of borrowing analytical elements from this tradition. The following three questions have been singled out for discussion: 1) How free are individuals to engage with non-institutionalized mind-sets? 2) How institutionally determined are individual interests? And 3) how

deliberate are individuals about provoking institutional effects? The objective of the discussion is to facilitate empirical study of institutional dynamics, conducted from a situated stance (see also Diaz-Bone, this volume, for methodological considerations).

### **How free are individuals to engage with non-institutionalized mind-sets?**

This question is about the ability of individuals to generate or appreciate non-institutionalized ideas. Ideas are considered institutionalized when individuals take them for granted as obvious and beyond question. Most Organizational Institutionalists would probably recognize that individuals, under certain conditions, do consider alternatives to the institutional order. However, it remains unclear how their awareness of alternatives emerges. Few empirical studies have attempted to shed light on this topic (see Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009), perhaps because of inadequate analytical tools.

French Pragmatist Sociology can help shed light on this question through its methodological entry point. Organizational Institutionalism tends to position actors as (partially) institutionally embedded. In contrast, French Pragmatist Sociology presumes that individuals are competent, that is, aware of alternatives and able to apply them in their organizational practice (see Pernkopf-Konhäusner, this volume, for a discussion of the competent actor). Organizational Institutionalists could tentatively adopt this assumption for methodological purposes to study individual cognition bottom-up. This orientation could shed light on which alternatives individuals actually evoke in their interactions. Rather than presuming, as would many Organizational Institutionalists, that actors are governed by a dominant institutional logic and/or by their structural position in the field (center versus periphery), we could start the analysis where French Pragmatist Sociologists would, namely without presuming structural determination.

Doing so would allow us to investigate if, when, and how individuals mobilize legitimizing elements to support their ideas.

French Pragmatist Sociology ‘opens up’ the relational playing ground beyond structural attributes. However, this opening may be too wide from an Organizational Institutionalism perspective because it dismisses institutional determinants of interactions. The anti-determinist stance of French Pragmatist Sociology presumes that individuals have cognitive access to all objectively available worlds (e.g., the seven economies of worth as formulated by Boltanski and Thévenot) and that they can relatively easily mobilize them in their organizational pursuits. Organizational Institutionalism, at least in its classical version, represents a quasi-determinist stance in which individuals are presumed to enact a dominant institutional logic. Accordingly, if individuals do not activate the full panoply of worlds in their negotiations, French Pragmatist Sociology would interpret it as a deliberate dismissal of worlds that individuals deem to provide poor justification for their pursuits. Organizational Institutionalists would, in contrast, read such an observation as an indication that individuals are not aware of objectively given alternatives because their cognition is institutionally circumscribed. This quasi-determinist position is as unlikely as the anti-determinist one to produce surprising empirical results.

If applied carefully, the ‘open-ended’ stance of French Pragmatist Sociology can be methodologically refreshing and theoretically stimulating as a starting point for an empirical investigation. In fact, an agnostic stance toward the institutional determination of interactions may be the most fruitful starting point for an empirical analysis of the degrees of freedom that are accessible to individuals. An agnostic stance in empirical analyses would ask individuals about the options they perceive and the reasons for their



selection if they describe a choice. Such an inquiry could involve observations and text analysis, but it must also include interviews. Real-time interviewing is essential because individuals rarely can recall their thoughts retrospectively. However, it can be rather challenging to conduct real-time interviewing because the researcher needs to be present at the right time to identify relevant situations when they arise and to conduct interviews immediately following the event (Schwarz, 2007).

### **How institutionally determined are individual interests?**

A related question is the extent to which individual interests are institutionally determined, that is, whether individuals (only or mostly) pursue goals that institutions depict as worthy, significant and relevant? Scholars of French Pragmatist Sociology would probably claim that individuals pursue a wider range of goals in their organizational practice, whereas Organizational Institutionalists would emphasize the pursuit of institutionalized goals, i.e., widely endorsed as valuable and worthy of pursuit. These two stances are so ingrained in their respective theoretical formulations that the question is rarely, if ever, subjected to empirical inquiry. To develop a situated stance in Organizational Institutionalism, we need to address this question empirically.

The application of French Pragmatist Sociology to an empirical analysis would provide a very broad, perhaps too broad, analytical lens for identifying the nature of individuals' interests. Individuals are not always consciously aware of their own interests and they may be unwilling to share them fully with a researcher in an interview situation. In addition, individuals may (unknowingly) exaggerate their own uniqueness by attributing the source of their interests to their individual will, often unaware that their desires are subject to institutional forces that, like an invisible hand, pull them in

the same direction. This subconscious shaping of individual interests and the prioritization of them is indeed a thorny problem for empirical inquiry. Unless we proceed very carefully, we are likely to just confirm our initial assumptions. Hence, empirical researchers should keep an agnostic stance toward the institutional determination of individual interests and proceed very carefully to collect and analyze data. French Pragmatist Sociology offers an interesting empirical starting point for such an analysis, provided that we carefully consider the extent to which institutions determine individual interests, of which individuals are rarely aware.

### **How deliberate are individuals about provoking institutional effects?**

A third question pertains to how aware individuals are of the institutional effects that may result from their words and actions. This question, essential to the formulation of a situated stance in Organizational Institutionalism, is frequently evoked in the literatures on institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2011) and institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009). Scholars raise the question of whether it is the *intention*, the *action* or the *institutional effects* that constitute the defining feature of this concept. A focus on *intentions* evokes the previous topic of individual cognition, calling for further inquiry into the choices available to individuals. An emphasis on *action* raises the question of whether individuals are aware, when they act, of their own motives. And an underscore of *institutional effects* of such actions casts doubt on whether individuals actually shape institutional outcomes or whether the most powerful determinants are located at higher levels of analysis (e.g., organization, field or world).

The adoption of French Pragmatist Sociology in an empirical study could enable inquiry into the topic of how conscious individuals are about the potential field-level

effects of their deliberate actions. Its emphasis on interactions related to negotiations and decision-making, notably those aimed at establishing pragmatic coordination arrangements, can provide valuable insight into individuals' potential field-level awareness. For instance, individuals may bring up projected field-level effects during negotiations to support or refute a proposal for a given economy of worth. French Pragmatist Sociology cannot capture these perceived field-level effects since this level of analysis is not part of its theoretical focus. However, in combination with Organizational Institutionalism, this perspective can help illuminate how aware individuals are of the potential field-level effects of their choices and actions.

In practice, scholars may observe negotiations and decision-making processes with a keen interest in whether the arguments evoke only organizational outcomes or also potential field level effects. Further probing through real-time interviews could explore how aware individuals are of potential field-level effects, including normative or regulative obstacles to such effects. We should keep in mind, in conducting such studies, that individual awareness is likely to evolve when individuals engage in negotiation, decision-making and interviewing. Awareness of potential field-level effects is a moving target that can be difficult to study.

In addition, French Pragmatist Sociology aims at studying negotiation and decision-making processes related to the establishment of pragmatic coordination arrangements. This starting point is not neutral. Firstly, when individuals engage in negotiations on economy of worth/ worlds/ logics, they have already gained some awareness of alternative framings. This analytical starting point misses the moment when individuals become aware of alternatives to their taken-for-granted perspective. As such, it captures only some situations of relevance to a situated stance in

Organizational Institutionalism. Secondly, the outcome of a negotiation or decision-making process rarely manifests in predictable actions and effects. Individuals may act, more or less defiantly, in disconformity with the outcomes of negotiations and decision-making, regardless of their taking part in these interactions. We must therefore keep in mind that French Pragmatist Sociology is not equipped to theorize about subsequent patterns of organizational practice and their potential effects.

## CONCLUSION

My main argument is that French Pragmatist Sociology, applied to empirical analyses, holds promise for developing a situated stance in Organizational Institutionalism, and hence for formulating its micro-foundations. French Pragmatist Sociology can, with some adaptation to Organizational Institutionalism, guide empirical inquiry into some topics that have so far escaped scrutiny. In this short article, I briefly explored three of these topics, namely institutional boundaries of individual cognition, institutional determination of individual interests, and individual awareness of potential field-level effects. I argued that French Pragmatist Sociology helps us gain more insight into how actors respond to, and actively mobilize, institutional logics in their organizational practice. We can use this perspective to empirically explore the subtle power that institutions exert on the cognition, emotion, and action of individuals. In this capacity, French Pragmatist Sociology, complementing recent advances by scholars of Organizational Institutionalism, contributes to the collective crafting of a more solid and coherent account of how embedded actors shape institutional dynamics.

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